

Sexual Content of Advertisements and the Smoking Process in Adolescents*

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Study objectives: To analyze the perception of sexual content (PSC) of tobacco advertisements and its potential impact on the process of smoking in adolescents.

Design, participants, and setting: A questionnaire was administered to 1,186 adolescents at the National Institute of Respiratory Diseases in Mexico City to determine the PSC. In addition, age, gender, susceptibility, receptivity, parental smoking and education, anxiety, depressive symptoms, school category, and grade were determined.

Interventions and measurements: The images of two advertisements were projected in color onto a screen. One of the images had unquestionable sexual content. The impact of the images was evaluated at the same time in the questionnaire.

Results: Forty-one percent of participants were nonsmokers (25% nonsusceptible and 16% susceptible), whereas 59% were smokers (47% experimenters and 12% established). Sixty-six percent were receptive to promotions of the tobacco companies. Seventy-two percent perceived sexual contents in the advertisements. A logistic regression model showed that receptivity (odds ratio [OR], 2.1; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.3 to 3.4), minimal PSC (OR, 2.6; 95% CI, 1.7 to 4.0), and high PSC (OR, 4.4; 95% CI, 2.4 to 8.0) were significantly associated with the status of smokers, whether experimenters or established. The strongest association was found with established smokers. Further analysis showed that male gender was significantly associated with high levels of PSC.

Conclusions: These results show that a high percentage of adolescents perceived sexual content in the tobacco advertisement, which, independent of the subject's receptivity, plays a role in the process of smoking, especially in male adolescents.

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Key words: adolescents; sexuality; tobacco advertisements

Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio; PSC = perception of sexual content

Cigarette smoking is a major worldwide public health problem, associated with a growing number of illnesses and responsible for > 4 million deaths annually.¹ This is of concern, as smoking prevalence among high school students appears to be increasing.² The mainstream of public health efforts to curb the smoking epidemic should be focused both on encouraging addicted smokers to quit and on preventing adolescent nonsmokers from starting. In order to decrease the overall prevalence of smoking and its concomitant morbidity and mortality, it is imperative to prevent the onset of smoking. This is

particularly important in adolescents because smoking initiation at an early age is associated with greater daily cigarette consumption, and a lower cumulative probability of quitting.³

It has been estimated that an important number of smokers start to smoke when < 17 years of age.^{4–6} In the United States, 90% of adult smokers begin by the age of 18 years.⁷

The tobacco industry has targeted youth and women particularly in lower socioeconomic groups and developing countries, as they represent a major untapped market. This group is being targeted with aggressive advertising, marketing, and promotional campaigns and sponsorships.^{8,9} Since consumers are aware that smoking may pose significant health risks, the evident success of the tobacco industry in manipulating consumer risk perception is particularly strong evidence of the power of market manipulation.¹⁰ In the past, cigarette advertisements directly alluded to physical traits, such as the rugged, virile men at work in the advertisements

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for Marlboro (Philip Morris U.S.A.; New York, NY). The Camel brand (R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company; Winston-Salem, NC) in turn emulated Marlboro with the men-at-work theme, but did not meet with much success until the "Joe Camel" character was invented. The Joe Camel campaign, which was presented to the US market in 1988, introduced a different sort of advertising that alluded indirectly to human characteristics and was interpreted as having sexual undertones and overtones.¹¹ The National Cancer Institute correctly predicted in 1991 that the new generation of cartoon advertisements promoting Camel cigarettes would only serve to recruit millions of adolescents to the smoking ranks.¹² To this end, subtle advertising techniques have increased in usage and are commonly accepted, particularly regarding cigarette smoking. While the message in the advertisement may not be evident at first view, it registers in the subconscious mind, where it influences perception and hence preference.

In a series of studies^{13,14} aimed at determining the causes of smoking initiation, there was a positive association between the promotional campaigns of tobacco companies and sharp rises in tobacco consumption among adolescents. It was also found that the possession or desire to acquire a promotional article of the tobacco industry is a risk factor for experimenting with cigarettes.¹⁵ Less attention, however, has been paid to the factors determining the attraction of adolescents to the promotional and advertising items of the tobacco companies. Given the concern that the Joe Camel advertising campaign had sexual overtones, we tested this belief. To this end, our principal interest was to determine, first, whether the adolescents perceived a sexual message in the advertisements and, second, the potential impact of the advertisements on tobacco smoking in adolescents who are receptive and susceptible to messages of the tobacco industry.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Population

The study was conducted between September 1998 and March 1999 by the Department of Research in Tobacco Smoking of the National Institute of Respiratory Disease in Mexico City. The study population consisted of 1,186 adolescents who ranged from 12 to 16 years of age. The subjects were students in grades 1, 2, and 3 of high school. The study sample was drawn from five private schools and three public schools situated in the south and the north of Mexico City.

Study Design

This was a cross-sectional questionnaire-based study. Students were briefed and assured of the confidentiality of the survey before administration of the questionnaire in their classrooms by

the researcher and the teacher. The questionnaire included items related to general data, current smoking status, parent's smoking status, smoking behavior of friends, receptivity to promotions by the tobacco industry, the presence of depressive symptoms, and anxiety. The questionnaire assessed the perception of sexual content related to previous exposure of the students to advertisements by using a slide projection of the advertisements.

School Category: In Mexico, students going to private school are more likely to be of a higher social class than students in a public school. Therefore, schools were classified as either private or public, and school category was used as a surrogate for social class to control for its potential as a confounder.

Parental Smoking and Education: The history of parental smoking was determined according to the question, "Does your father or mother smoke?" The answer was categorized as no or yes, and if yes whether it was only one parent or both who smoked. The educational level attained by both parents was determined according to the following categories: a high parent educational level was equivalent to at least one parent having a university education at the level of a masters or doctorate, or both parents at the level of a bachelors degree (first degree). An intermediate parent educational level was assigned if only one parent had a university education at the level of a bachelor (first degree), and a low parent educational level was assigned if neither parent had a university education.

Depression and Anxiety: The last section of the questionnaire consisted of the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale,¹⁶ which evaluated the presence of anxiety and depressive symptoms. A score > 8 in the corresponding section indicated the presence either of anxiety or depressive symptoms.

Smoking History and Susceptibility to Promotions by the Tobacco Industry: Based on the work of Pierce et al,¹⁵ a respondent was classified into one of four mutually exclusive categories: (1) established smokers, (2) experimenters, (3) non-susceptible never-smokers, and (4) susceptible never-smokers. An established smoker was defined as an adolescent giving a positive response to the questions, "Do you presently smoke?" and "Have you smoked at least 100 cigarettes in your life?" An experimenter was defined as an adolescent giving an affirmative response to "Have you ever smoked a cigarette?" or "Have you ever tried or experimented with cigarette smoking, even though it was only a few puffs?" A negative response to both of the questions categorized an adolescent as a never-smoker. A non-susceptible never-smoker, most recently named as committed never-smoker,¹⁷ was distinguished from other never-smokers by responses to three questions about future smoking: "Do you think that you will try a cigarette soon?" "If one of your best friends asked you to smoke a cigarette, would you accept?" and "At any time during the following year do you think that you would smoke a cigarette?" The possible answers were yes, no, or I don't know. To be classified as a nonsusceptible never-smoker, the adolescent needed to respond no to all three questions. Any other response led to the adolescent being categorized as susceptible to smoking.

Receptivity: This was defined in the same terms used by Pierce et al,¹⁵ and is a measure of the individual tendency to use a promotional article of the tobacco industry. Respondents were graded as being nonreceptive, minimally receptive, and highly receptive, according to their responses to the following questions: "Have you ever bought or received an item that advertises a certain brand of cigarettes or that was distributed by a tobacco company?" and "Do you think that you would ever use a promotional article of the tobacco industry such as a T-shirt or cap?" A respondent that was not receptive replied negatively to both questions. Minimal receptiveness was judged as a positive reply to one of the two questions, and highly receptive was a positive reply to both questions.

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